

RUFORUM Secretariat Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

BRIEFING NOTE TO THE BOARD EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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Introduction:

COVID-19 was first reported in December 2019 in the Wuhan Region of China. It was named COVID-19, a shortened form of “Coronavirus Disease 2019”. The Virus spread rapidly around the World and in March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a global pandemic. This followed a series of containment measures to curb its spread. For most nations of the World, measures included: travel bans, border closures, lock downs, school closures, social distancing, use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and curfews. In Uganda, the Government directed the closure of schools for all categories of learners on 20th March 2020, this was before the first case was reported. This was then followed by the closure of all borders (land and water) upon the first case being recorded. A series of other containment measures followed in line with the guidelines from the World Health Organisation.

This Briefing Note gives an update on how the RUFORUM Secretariat has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights ways in which the global and national containment measures have been mainstreamed in its operations.

Secretariat Response:

1. Travel ban

An international travel ban was instituted for all Secretariat staff by Executive Secretary on 2nd March 2020 as a protective measure. This directive is still in effect and is in alignment with the Presidential directive of keeping borders closed until further notice.

2. Working from Home

During the period, 27 March to 31 May, 2020, all the RUFORUM Secretariat staff worked from home. This was in response to Government lock down measures and night curfews that were imposed following the first outbreak reported in Uganda. Under this work environment, all staff meetings were moved online and conducted through the Zoom audio and video conferencing platform. Furthermore, all work assignments and reporting were done through email and phone communications.

3. Secretariat Re-opening under Standard Operating Procedures Mainstreaming COVID-19

Following the lifting of some containment measures by the President of Uganda and Ministry of Health and after over two (2) months of lock down, the RUFORUM Secretariat re-opened on 1 June, 2020. The RUFORUM Secretariat then developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to guide staff operations as they report to office. These include: (i) time management to bear in mind curfew; (ii) social distancing; (iii) work place hygiene; (iv) personal protective equipment; (v) office meetings and gatherings; (vi) communication and information management and; (vii) staff transportation arrangements.

4. Programme Implementation

- (i) *Survey*: In order to determine the potential impact of COVID-19 on Secretariat run Projects and their implementation, a survey was conducted. The Survey provided insights on project activities needing realignment, and appropriate engagement with the funders and partners for continued smooth project implementation.
- (ii) *Development of guidelines for project implementation under COVID-19*: RUFORUM Flagship Programme Managers developed and discussed the guidelines for mitigating COVID-19 Pandemic implications on project implementation with Project Principal Investigators which included: student welfare, budget expenditure and funds re-allocation, no-cost extensions, reporting and accountability, and project reviews.
- (iii) *Development of RUFORUM COVID-19 Response initiatives*: In order to increase resilience to withstand emergencies, organise, rebuild and recover from the current ongoing global COVID-19 crisis as well as project future trends and challenges, the RUFORUM Secretariat identified four (4) priority areas for strengthening Africa's capacity in education, research, science, technology and innovation and developed a guiding document operationalizing the initiatives.
- (iv) *Participation in global and continental initiatives addressing COVID-19*: RUFORUM is currently engaged in other initiatives to respond the COVID-19 Pandemic. It is leading Work Package six (6) of the established African Research and Innovation Council (ASRIC) Working Group to respond to the Impact of COVID-19 on Africa's Food and Nutrition Security. Work Package 6 involves Capacity Audit on Continental Research and Training Responsiveness to Uncertainties in Food Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (FNSSA).
- (v) *Development and introduction of Webinar Series*: In order to explore how best the RUFORUM Network and its Secretariat could reposition itself in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, and galvanise high level dialogue with key stakeholders, RUFORUM initiated and launched the **RUFORUM Webinar Series (1-13)**. The Webinar Series covers various themes that include: higher education; trans-boundary and zoonotic health issues, Agriculture, environment and livelihoods; and online learning and teaching.
- (vi) *Shift to online Governance convenings*: As a response to the ongoing international travel restrictions by Governments to manage the spread of COVID-19, RUFORUM has temporarily moved its Governance convenings to online platforms. For instance, the recently held Finance and Administration Committee Meeting and Board Executive Committee Meeting were delivered successfully through Zoom online and video conferencing platform.
- (vii) *Streamlined COVID-19 in the RUFORUM Budget and Work Plan for the 2020-2021 Financial Year*. The recently approved Secretariat 2020-2021 Financial Year Work Plan and Budget have taken into account the challenges and opportunities arising from COVID-19 pandemic.

(viii) *Support to selected international students:* The RUFORUM Secretariat provided additional financial and psycho-social support to students funded by the Mastercard Foundation (MCF) in the two early adopter universities of Egerton and Gulu Universities. Each MCF@RUFORUM sponsored student received \$150 to cover for food and cost- extension to their scholarship for four (4) months. Further, financial support amounting to \$1000 was provided to International Masters and PhD students who are residing at Makerere University Agricultural Research Institute Kabanyolo (MUARIK).